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“Romancing” the Popular Politics:  
A Religious Aspect of Popular Politics in  
Tanauan City, Batangas, the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In 2004 during my initial research period in Manila as well as in Tanauan City, Batangas Province, many friends advised me to be wary because Tanauan is widely known as a “drug haven” and a city notorious for its violent environment, especially because of its local politics.<sup>1</sup> However, as I stayed longer in Tanauan, I noticed the narratives of ordinary people that manifested a different perspective on the city’s political dynamics. Ordinary people expressed vivid memories of former mayor Cesar Platon (1998–2001) as a “man without bodyguards,” “a man in white T-shirt only,” or “a man who gives flowers during fiestas,” rather than as a murder victim who deserved his fate.<sup>2</sup> Throughout my research I also constantly heard descriptions of Mayor Alfredo Corona (2001–2005) as a person (*tao*) who is good (*mabait*), has a clean heart (*malinis na puso*), has a good inner being (*magandang loob*), and is helpful (*matulungin*).

How do we approach this sort of politics according to ordinary people, which puts much emphasis on concepts of *mabait* and *loob* to describe a leader, whose reputation to outsiders may be very different? To answer this question, this article seeks to study the politics of ordinary people who are labeled variously as the masses, the subordinate, the powerless, the nonelite, or, even going back to the Spanish period, the *pobres y ignorantes* (the poor and ignorant). This study analyzes ethnographic data gathered from one barangay in Tanauan City from October 2004 to June 2005 and October to November 2005 in order to decode the perceptions of ordinary people regarding local politics and their relationships with the elite. It looks at their lives as situated in everyday contestations and negotiations through their narration of experiences that have affected their lives, their evaluation of social justice, their motivations for certain actions, and their religious ideas in everyday politics. This study attempts to extend the understanding of popular politics in the Philippines from a sociocultural and sociopolitical approach.

## Traditional and Alternative Approaches to the Study of Local Politics

Carl Lande (1965), Mary R. Hollnsteiner (1963), Remigio E. Agpalo (1969), and in a

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more general sense David Wurfel (1988) couch Philippine political structures in a patron-client framework, in which kinship ties, *compadrazgo* (coparenthood), and personalism characterize the relationship between politicians or elites, on one hand, and the masses, on the other (cf. Mendoza 1999). The patron provides all sorts of help to their clients, and in return the clients are obliged to repay the favor in order to avoid being stigmatized as *walang utang na loob* (without debt of gratitude) or *walang hiya* (without shame). Such Filipino values structure politics into a hierarchical relation between patron and client, and determine the basic units of the country's factionalist political organizations.

In the early 1970s political studies began to include the instrumentalist approach, with its focus on the emergence of a "machine" politician. Analyzed through the prism of electoral politics, this approach reduced the patron-client framework not only to the cultural aspects of *utang na loob* and *hiya* but also to the material inducements that enable "new men" to dominate Philippine politics (Machado 1971, 1974a, 1974b; cf. Kimura 1997; Kawanaka 1998; *Politik* 1997). The relationship between patron and client is functional as long as material inducements are present.

The instrumentalist approach to Philippine political behavior and the functionalist reading of politician-voter, rich-poor, and elite-mass relationships have come to dominate the study of Philippine social and historical development. To Benedict Anderson (1988), Amando Doronila (1985), and Paul Hutchcroft (2000), among others, the Philippines' "underdeveloped" politics is caused by the proliferation of "oligarchic elites" who have total control over the state. The oligarchy is said to have descended from the "caciques" that emerged from the mid-nineteenth century through the control of land ownership for the production of export crops and the manipulation of landlord-tenant ties (Cushner 1976; Phelan 1976; McCoy and De Jesus 1982; Larkin 1982; Fegan 1982; Steinberg 1972; Cullinane 2003). Thus, patron-client relationships (similar to Lande's views) proliferated under the conditions of an inefficient bureaucracy, a weak economy, and values such as *utang na loob*, *hiya*, fear, and violence.

The framework of bossism in the study of politics derives from a similar view of the country's weak institutional formation during the period of U.S. colonization (Sidel 1999; 2000; 2002a). In John Sidel's (1999, 18) framework a boss is a politician who manages to manipulate state resources for his accumulation of personal power, a condition Sidel identifies as "primitive accumulation." In this framework a politician is not seen as a "new man" but as a boss who is able to control "the broad mass of the population" whose "poverty and economic security," as Sidel (2002b, 131) puts it, makes "voters susceptible to clientelist, coercive, and monetary pressures and inducements." The struggle between bosses for economic resources and political influence is often resolved through violent means.

Since the early 1990s the patron-client frameworks as well as the bossism model have been criticized. One criticism points out those studies of Philippine politics tend to identify and label supposedly basic attributes of "Filipino identity," which operate in tandem with a negative "othering" of Philippine culture. In his critique of some of the classic works by American and Filipino historians and political scientists, Reynaldo Ileto

(2001) argues that the dominant sociopolitical and historical discourse on the Philippines has accentuated the “orientalizing” of so-called Filipino values as the negative other of Western, or more specifically American, values.<sup>3</sup> By essentializing certain observed peculiarities of Filipino political culture (such as patron-client ties, ritual kinship, personal loyalties, *utang na loob*, and *hiya*), many scholars have fixed the masses as submissive, personally loyal to their patrons, and afraid of being condemned to shame if a debt is not paid. Conversely the elite become fixed as the manipulator of traditional values and the monopolizer of politics for its own ends. In other words, according to Iletto, complex Philippine social structures and values are reduced (or orientalized) to patron-client ties, family politics, and violent behavior, which constitute the negative opposite of an ideal system represented by the American democratic model introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Another critique of the patron-client frameworks emanates from an interpretation of politics as embedded in everyday life experiences and draws from the perspective of culture, language, and emotion. Benedict Kerkvliet’s (1991; 1995) pioneering work on everyday politics in the Philippine context looks carefully into the lives of ordinary people in order to excavate hidden forms of resistance (cf. Scott 1985). Kerkvliet’s (1991) study of the peasantry in Talavera, Nueva Ecija Province, goes beyond the conventional approaches that focus on how material incentives shape superordinate-subordinate relations. He demonstrates that peasant claims are not limited to subsistence needs (such as minimum wage, food, or shelter for survival), but also revolve around issues of dignity, respect, and quality of life as human beings. Thus, claims are not based on formal patron-client relationships but on the idiom of “help.” That help brings about provisions is a sign that the rich respect poor tenants. Kerkvliet’s analysis places great importance on the peasants’ deployment of ordinary people’s language and concepts, such as *karapatan* (rights), *pantay-pantay* (equality), *kalayaan* (freedom), *katarungan* (justice), *kapwa* (the unity of self with others), and *pakikipagkapwa* (treating others as equals, as you would yourself, as human beings). Underlying these concepts is the language of contending values between the rich and the poor. Kerkvliet’s study brings to light peasant resistance that goes beyond patron-client ties, material inducements, and the politics of fear, and instead hinges upon a politics of respect and dignity.

In quite a similar trajectory, Mark Turner’s (1991, 19) study of Zamboanga City argues that politicians also engage in the politics of moral order—moral standing and integrity—that goes beyond patronage politics. Employing cultural, linguistic, and anthropological approaches, Resil Mojares’s (2002) study of the Osmeña family of Cebu indicates that politics should not be seen as “rulers, leaders, and big men” and the “subordination of issues to particularistic concerns” because of its constant change in scope and meaning. For instance, the Osmeñas’ electoral campaigns define politics in terms of “crusades,” which use “primordial symbols of democracy, autonomy, and progress” (ibid., 336). In contrast to the traditional patron-client models, the alternative approaches that look at the moral perspectives of masses and elites locate politics from below, indicating that cultural politics goes beyond the formal electoral system, political offices, patronage, and party politics. More importantly, they focus on the nonmaterial

elements of politics, particularly language and culture, which “patrons” may deem necessary in order to manifest the rhetoric that is acceptable to their “clients.”

Other studies, such as those by Myrna J. Alejo and colleagues (1996), Fenella Cannell (1999), and Iletto (1979), highlight religious values and concepts as units of analysis in the study of ordinary people’s everyday social meanings of politics and resistance. Alejo et al. (1996) analyze the concepts of *loob* (inside) and *taong-labas* (outsider), which are constructed through religious practices to describe the rationale and worldview of ordinary people in selecting their popular leaders. Politicians are seen as playing the role of a mediator (similar to the shaman who is a mediator between spirits and the faithful) who understands the needs of local people, and is thus considered to be someone from the *loob* (circle of people). Cannell’s (1999) anthropological study of the village of San Ignacio in the Bicol region describes the perception of power by the poor or *kaming mayong-mayo* (we who have nothing at all) through the everyday idiom of emotions such as pity, oppression, and love. Meanwhile, Iletto (1979) looks at *loob*, *damay* (empathy), and *liwanag* (light) as manifested in the *pasyon* in giving meaning to the participation of Tagalog peasants in anticolonial movements. These studies portray the politics of ordinary people—the peasants and the poor—through the excavation of their languages and emotions. They also manifest a view of politics that goes beyond patron-client ties.

### **Bases for Scrutiny of the Self: *Lakaran* and *Sariling Sikap***

Far from being passive or being dependent on politicians, ordinary people always refer to their experiences as bases for scrutinizing the self (*sarili*) as well as others. People actively make judgments on what should be and should not be in “doing” politics, which contrasts with views of them as being dependent on or submissive to the political and economic manipulation by elites. Before we turn to *sarili* as well as to *sariling sikap*, or diligence, we need to understand what *lakaran* means to ordinary people. *Sariling sikap* makes sense in relation to peasants’ interpretation of their life experiences, which they refer to as their *lakaran* and which involves encounters with politicians, their perceptions of the world or society, and their everyday struggles for subsistence.

#### *Lakaran*

The notion of a *lakaran* is not exclusive to the Philippines: Leonardo N. Mercado (1974) equates it to the Javanese *aliran* (flowing). The root word is *lakad*, which means to walk. According to Mercado, “*may lakad*” means having a task to perform. It may refer to the trend or manner of acting (English 2005, 737). *Lakaran* (noun: the walk) means a place to walk on (*ibid.*), which involves both business and leisurely activities (Mercado 1974). *Lakaran* also has another dimension: “a technical meaning as a pilgrimage, a mission, an ascent (with Christ to Calvary) to spread the word” (*ibid.*). This religious-oriented dimension of *lakaran* is clearly shown in Iletto’s *Pasyon and Revolution* (1979, 56, 70), which describes *lakaran* as “a journey on foot” that traverses a long and dangerous road, entailing constant physical suffering. It is similar to Christ’s journey to spread the word



of God, a mission or *lakaran* where one faces many obstacles and difficulties. In other words, *lakaran* is an experience of hardship that involves “the control of self” (the *loob*).

To this religious idea of *lakaran* ordinary people subscribe to rationalize their everyday experiences, especially when making a judgment on another person in relation to the self (*sarili*). The ability to scrutinize and make calculations about others, especially politicians who provide *tulong* or help, is always associated with the scrutiny of one’s own experiences or *lakaran* as indicated in the following interview (Capio 2005):<sup>4</sup>

Iyon naman eh alam mo na sa klase ng tao eh. . . . Dito sa amin, sa lahat ng nagiging mayor dito, alam ko maaaring manalo. Sa kalkulasyon ko alin ang maaari sa hindi. Kaya ako hindi pa nakakaboto doon sa talo. Alam ko na naman sa *lakaran* ng eksperyensa mo ang maaari ka o hindi eh sa pulitika.

You know what kind of person he is. . . . In our area here, of all who have become mayors here, I know who would win. I calculate who would win and who would not. That’s why I’ve never voted for someone who lost. I know based on your *lakaran* of experience if you would win or not in politics.

O, mayroong talaga namang nakikisama. Maraming mapagkunwari eh. Kung tutuusin pag nagpangita kayo akala mo talagang totoong-totoo . . . siyempre, nahahalata mo naman ang sino dito ang talagang magaling na tao at hindi.

Yes, there are those who really relate to you. There are many fakers. If you think about it, when you meet, you would think they’re very sincere . . . Of course, you can notice here who is a good person and who is not.

Parang babatayan mo sa klase ng, iyon nga, ng mga galaw nila.

It’s like you would base it on the kind of, that’s it, of actions they make.

In the excerpts above, *lakaran ng eksperyensa* pertains to the idea that one has seen (*kita*) many things in life, making one critical but also able to make sense of the world. The ability to calculate (*kalkulasyon*) is based on the regularity of one’s own experiences, particularly those encounters with the actions (*galaw*) of politicians over time. The critical calculation is based on the scrutiny of politicians’ way of relating, their *pakikisama*, for one to discern whether they are being deceptive (*kunwari*) or are sincere (*talagang totoong-totoo*) or a good person (*magaling na tao*).

*Lakaran* in this case becomes the basis for scrutinizing one’s own *loob* or the self (*sarili*). The self expressed in *alam ko* (I know) and *Kaya ako hindi pa nakakaboto doon sa talo* (I’ve never voted for someone who lost) derives from one’s everyday experiences of hardship and struggles (*lakaran ng eksperyensa*): the constant disappointment and

deception at the hands of bad politicians have made this person's self sharp and critical in making judgments about society. *Lakaran* equates to the experiences/*lakaran* of Christ, which enables one to surmount hardship. Life is a constant process of learning through misgivings (*nadala*) that shapes and reshapes a person's loob—the self/*sarili*—making him or her disciplined, sharp, and critical in his or her own manner of perceiving social issues, and of coming to terms with the challenges in the world.

### *Sariling Sikap* (Self-help or Independence)

A loob that is strengthened by a lifetime of *lakaran* is the basis for one's confidence in judging politicians. The loob has been transformed into one's pride, dignity, and respect, interpreted as the effect of *sariling sikap*, self-help or diligence. *Sariling sikap* can refer to hard work, or to the reliance on one's effort to protect one's pride to avoid shame (*hiya*). However, the ordinary people of Tanauan see *sariling sikap* as going beyond pride and the avoidance of shame. Rather, they consider *sariling sikap* as the practice of disciplining and purifying one's loob to achieve a sort of freedom.

Marcel Mauss (1967, 40) indicates that the obligation to receive a gift is an act “to take up the challenge and prove that you [the recipient] are not unworthy.” To receive is to recognize one's own dignity. However, in the context of ordinary people receiving or rejecting help (*tulong*) from the rich, a deeper look at *sariling sikap* reveals not only a stubbornness in protecting one's dignity but also a purification of loob in the *lakaran*, which translates into a sense of freedom. In his metalinguistic analysis Mercado (1974) categorizes *sarili* into three aspects. *Sarili* means self, but its meaning can be extended to include freedom or independence, and property and possession. In this light *sariling sikap* pertains to a person's loob, which includes a sense of freedom for the individual self and also for the community at large. As Berto (2005) says:

Aba'y nakakahingi dito. Eh ngayon, are naman eh *sariling sikap* pa rin ang aking are. Eh iyan namang ganyan eh hindi na rin binibigyan, iyon laang walang sementadong ganyan ang binibigyan, ang pabahay. Iyon, marami na rito ang binigyan yata, ano, Badette? Ako nga, di ga ito'y dinaanan ng bagyong Rosing. Bagsak iyang bahay ko. Kahit isang yero hindi ako binigyan. Magsikap ka na laang at wala ka pang problema.

Oh, here, you can ask for help. Now this [referring to his house] is again from my own hard work. A house like that can no longer be a recipient, but only those not cemented are given [help] with housing. Well, many have been given here, right, Badette? In my case, didn't typhoon Rosing pass through here? That house of mine collapsed. But not even a single iron sheet was given to me. Just work hard and you will even be spared from problems.

Pag hindi kayo magsisikap, eh di wala. Kung kayo'y nagsisikap, baka naman sakaling bibiyayaan ng maganda.

If you don't work hard, then there's nothing. If you are working hard, you just might be blessed with something beautiful.

Pag naparami, pambenta. Pag kakaunti, pang-ulam.

If [the harvest] is bountiful, that's for vending. If not much, that's for our own consumption.

The extract above reveals that to subscribe to sariling sikap is to seek the purity of one's loob, and to believe that good fortune may come if hard work is applied. Thus, whether the harvest is large or small is not as important as having a land to till, a land to which one can apply hard labor. As the informant suggests, to be hardworking brings the added advantage of freeing yourself from problems (*wala ka pang problema*). Problems can refer to material conditions, such as uncontrollable weather, a bad harvest, and the exhaustion of the soil, but it can also refer to the humiliation one endures if one were to seek help.

More importantly, sariling sikap pertains to a sort of freedom. Akin to Christ's unconditional sacrifice and suffering that in the end became a blessing (*biyaya*) to salvation, one is required to work hard to gain a good harvest or find life's happiness. This happiness does not come easily but requires the discipline of the sarili. The statement—"If you are working hard, you just might be blessed with something beautiful"—points to the possibility of a good reward from disciplining the self and overcoming obstacles in one's lakaran. The appearance of the word *biyaya* (blessing, reward) is not accidental. It implies that the disciplining of self or loob in conditions of hardship, as a form of lakaran and sariling sikap, will ultimately bear fruit (*biyaya*), if not in a good harvest, then at least in inner peace, a sense of freedom, or other forms of happiness.

Having gone through a lot in life, including having to put up with false politicians, one's experience of lakaran produces freedom through the purification of one's loob or sarili—manifested in sariling sikap that is cultivated, disciplined, and purified in various ways. A self that is capable of perseverance, hard work, and self-discipline attains happiness, salvation, and freedom.

Applying the concepts of sarili and sariling sikap in the construction of the political relationship between patrons and clients, we can see that, if and when the poor ask for assistance (*tulong*) from politicians, they do not submit to the material comforts that are delivered. As we shall see in the next section, sariling sikap gives one the ability or confidence (or power) to engage in the critical scrutiny of the politician's loob, and thereby determine if the *tulong* is sincere or tainted with impurity.

## **Recognizing the Elites: Popular Interpretation of Sainthood**

### ***Matuwid (Righteous)***

To understand the concept of *matuwid*, let us look at the following *awit* (songs): *Ang Rosaryo* (The Rosary), *Ina ng Diyos* (Mother of God), and *Hiwaga II* (Mystery II).<sup>5</sup> These three out of the twelve *awit* sang by the elderly during their prayers of the rosary in October right up to the “Day of the Dead” (*Undas*) illustrate the gratitude and enjoyment of righteousness as felt by Mary. A detailed look at the *awit* suggests that they take the rosary as a guide to understand the challenges they experience in the world. The *awit* provides the rationale for the poor’s support for a particular politician.

#### **ANG ROSARYO**

Ang rosaryo  
ay isang kasaysayan  
na nagmumula sa kaligtasan  
bawat butil ay nagbibigay ng buhay  
sa bawat nilikha  
Maria ang naging daan  
upang misteryo  
ni Kristo’y matuklasan  
na nagmula sa Ama  
na tunay na nagmamahal  
sa sangkatauhan

#### **THE ROSARY**

The rosary  
is a history  
that begins in salvation  
every grain gives life  
to every creature  
Mary has become the way  
so that the mystery  
of Christ would be discovered,  
which began with the Father  
who truly loves  
all of mankind

#### **INA NG DIYOS**

O, Ina ng Diyos  
Ina ng biyaya  
tulongan ninyo kami sa aming mga dalangin  
na kami’y patawarin sa aming mga sala  
at akayin mo kami

sa matuwid na landas  
sa araw-araw  
naming suliranin  
kami po ay iyong tulungan  
upang kapayapaan ng Diyos  
ay mapa sa amin  
habang nabubuhay

#### MOTHER OF GOD

Oh, Mother of God  
Mother of blessings  
help us in our prayers  
that we be pardoned of our sins  
and lead us  
on the straight path  
as we face our daily  
problems  
please help us  
so that the peace of God  
will be ours

#### HIWAGA II

Ina, Ikaw ay mahal  
sana'y mahalín mo rin ako  
Mahal na Ina ng Diyos  
ikaw ang Ina naming  
hiwaga ng buhay  
hiwaga nitong kalooban  
ang hinihiling ko sa inyo  
Panginoon gabayan mo kami  
Mahal na Ina tulungan mo po ako  
sa mga suliranin sa buhay  
Ikaw Ina pag-asa ng  
aking buhay  
Ikaw ang liwanag, liwanag ng aking buhay  
salamat Ina sa inyong pagmamahal  
hindi malilimutan  
ang iyong pagmamahal,  
salamat O Hesus sa iyong pagmamahal  
Inang Maria ang aming Ina  
paano ang buhay  
kung ikaw Ina ay mawawala  
Ikaw ang pag-asa ng aking buhay

## MYSTERY II

Mother, you are loved  
I hope you will also love me  
Beloved Mother of God  
You are our mother  
mystery of our life  
mystery of this inner being  
what I ask of you  
Lord, guide us  
Beloved Mother, please help me  
in the problems of life  
You, Mother, are the hope of  
my life  
You are the light, the light of my life  
thank you, Mother, for your love  
Unforgettable is  
your love,  
thank you, Jesus, for your love  
Mother Mary, our mother  
what would life be like  
if you, Mother, are gone  
You are the hope of my life

The songs above indicate that, through Mother Mary's intercession, one begins to understand Christ's suffering and salvation. To feel the pain and suffering that Mother Mary felt in accompanying Christ's journey toward salvation is analogous to the search for the path of righteousness. This path is indicated in the sixth and seventh stanzas of the first awit: *Maria ang naging daan / upang misteryo / ni Kristo'y matuklasan* (Mary has become the way / so that the mystery / of Christ would be discovered), and the fifth and sixth stanzas of the second awit: *at akayin mo kami / sa matuwid na landas* (and lead us / on the straight path).

The path to righteousness is the attainment of the light (*liwanag*) or, in popular terms, the escape from the miseries of life and the attainment of happiness. This is indicated in the eleventh and twelfth stanzas of the second awit: *Ikaw Ina pag-asa ng / aking buhay / Ikaw ang liwanag, liwanag ng aking buhay* (You, Mother, are the hope of / my life / You are the light, the light of my life). To attain *liwanag* is to lead oneself out of the darkness and into the light, that is, from the miseries of life into happiness and freedom from difficulties.

In the awit above, the phrase "matuwid na landas," literally translated as the straight path, connotes the path to righteousness. *Tuwid* or *matuwid* (adjective; noun form: *katuwiran*) means straight, direct. It has another nuance, which means fair, just, and rightful. *Landas* is a noun that has two meanings: one is a path or narrow road, the other



is slipperiness. (English 2005, 772) Therefore, *matuwid na landas* suggests guidance toward righteousness in a journey that is full of obstacles. In the context of the *awit*, the path of righteousness “experienced” by Mother Mary is the path that requires one to face the obstacles in life akin to what Mary had to undergo because of her love for Christ. When one is able to attain such feeling, one has achieved the *liwanag* because one’s *loob* has been purified through the journey.

In this context persons who provide help are perceived as those who sincerely show the path of righteousness (*matuwid na landas*) to the people because the provider’s *loob* is a purified one. In contrast, persons who also provide help but do not have a saintly heart are seen as insincere and therefore cannot be reached or accessed by the people.

Tinitignan ko iyong taong talagang alam kong gumagawa siya ng *matuwid*. Kasi ang sabi nga, ang tao hinahatulan ayon sa kanyang gawa. . . . Pag iyong tao’y gumagawa ng *matuwid*, ayun, tama iyon. Pwede mong samahan iyon. (Alberto 2005a)

I look at the person who I know is really doing what’s right. Because, as they say, a person is judged by his actions. . . . If a person is doing what’s right, there, it’s correct. You can go with him.

Nadating iyon (Sonia) siguro sa maraming pagtitipon, pero iyong house to house, hindi. Siguro hindi na niya kaya. Para kasing may edad na. Nakaka-factor iyon, iyong edad nila. Eh si Corona parang energetic talaga. At saka parang ang yaman niya (Sonia), di na ma-reach! Parang ang taas na, mahirap lapitan. Ganon ang tingin ng tao. Dadaan ka kung kani-kanino bago ka makapunta sa kanya. Hindi ba iyong makaka-approach ka ng diretso. (Juliana, 2005)

She (Sonia) would perhaps go to many meetings, but not do house-to-house visits. Maybe she can’t do it anymore. It seems she has aged. That’s one factor, their age. Corona is really energetic, eh. And it seems that she (Sonia) is so rich, she can’t be reached anymore! She seems so high up there, it’s difficult to approach her. That’s how people see it. You’d have to go through so many people before you can get to her. You can’t approach her directly.

These statements convey the idea of *matuwid* as a quality that pertains to the good deeds of a person in his or her act of providing help. In contrast, Sonia is seen as a candidate who is difficult to reach for *tulong*. Her being rich and her ability to provide *tulong* do not guarantee that the poor can depend on her. What is important is the quality of the *loob* of a person. Alberto’s self-assurance about a particular leader derives not merely from the latter’s ability to solve the immediate problems of the poor, such as paying hospital bills, providing roads, buying liquor for the group, and so on, but also his recognition of the fact that the *tulong* is coming sincerely from the *loob* of the provider, such as Corona’s. The good deed reflects the provider’s own *lakaran* along the straight

(matuwid) path, similar to Mother Mary's compassion and love for Christ. These people who help others along the path to liwanag deserve popular support.

### **The Religious Idea of *Liwanag***

Liwanag means light, illumination, or enlightenment (De Guia 2005, 376). Liwanag or kaliwanagan also means lucidity and clearness, especially of thought, expression, and perception (English 2005, 836). Liwanag in the context of the Philippine revolution connotes the condition of freedom or kalayaan, a break from the darkness of colonization to achieve the light (liwanag) of independence (Ileto 1979). As shown in the next few sections, liwanag represents a sense of happiness or freedom from miseries. Ordinary people's understanding of liwanag indicates that their manner of scrutiny or calculation vis-à-vis politicians is not constrained by the claim of hegemonic power. Their manifestation of political contestation and negotiation is to give notice of their aspirations for a better society.

### ***Liwanag* and Equality**

Eating together or sharing a feast (*handa*) is one way by which ordinary people come to shape their perceptions about the *mayaman* (rich) and how they behave. Meals or feasts provide an opportunity for them to construct their very own notion of "equality." A *mayaman* is usually categorized as deceitful (*madaya*) and hopelessly uncaring (*walang pag-asa*). These labels of the *mayaman* are manifested during a feast, during which they are seen as segregating themselves from the poor, as seen in the statement below. This statement also proposes that the rich ask for the poor's help in the form of votes during elections, but do not know how to return the favor, in which case the situation is deemed hopeless.

Eh di, sila mayayaman, nagkakainan, sila-sila. Eh 'yong mahirap, masaya man eh areglado. Eh do'n sa isa, hindi ka makakapasok. Hindi ka kumbidado eh. 'Yan ang mga istorya dito sa botohan. Atsaka dayaan pa! Kaya marami ngayon, eh hindi na naboto, ayaw na. 'Yon din lang ang mangyayari. Matulungan mo man eh wala ring pag-asa, hindi ka matutulungan. 'Yon ang sistema ngayon. (Gitoy 2005)

Well, eh, they who are rich, they eat together among themselves. The poor, eh, are happy, it's fine. Eh, in one place, you are not allowed to enter. You're not invited. Those are the stories of elections here. And there's cheating besides! That is why many now don't vote, they don't like to anymore. You may be able to help [the candidate win], but there's still no hope, you cannot expect to receive help. That is the system now.

However, not all the *mayaman* are perceived in a negative manner. Throughout my fieldwork, the people in the barangay described the *Dimayugas* as good persons (*mabait na tao*), as helpful to the poor (*tinutulungan ang mahirap na tao*), as blessed by God (*daming biyaya na kanilang tinatanggap sa Diyos*), and as landowners (*may ari ng*

*lupa*) (Mani 2005b). Even though the Dimayugas are considered mayaman, they are seen as a different sort of rich.

Among the attributes of this “good” type of mayaman are not being snobbish (*matapobre*) and not discriminatory (*walang pinipiling tao*). These attributes are displayed acutely also on occasions of feasting, as the following passage tells us:

Katulad nga ng may ari ng lupang ito, kaunting bagay lang na problema, agad sila’y oo, sige, bibigyan kita. Hindi kagaya ng ibang mayaman na . . . Saka sila, kahit mayaman, talagang mayaman sila, iyong walang pinipiling tao, klase ng tao. Sabay-sabay kayong kakain, hindi katulad ng ibang mayaman na mamaya, kayo kakain, kami muna. Sila hindi, sama-sama sa pagkain, sabay-sabay. Kung ano ang kanilang kinakain, kakainin din iyon ng dumating. Hindi sila matapobre kahit mayaman, talagang yayaman nga sila. Pananalangin sila ng kapwa tao na “yumaman pa kayo.” (Mani 2005a)

Like those who own this land (the Dimayugas), even with very small problems immediately they say, yes, okay, we’ll give you. Unlike other rich people who . . . And they, even if they’re rich, they are really rich, they do not discriminate, they do not select the kinds of people they deal with. You would eat together, unlike other very rich people who would eat first and let you eat later. They’re different, they join you in meals, you eat at the same time. What they are eating is what they offer to someone who comes. They don’t look down on the poor, even if they’re rich, really rich. Other people pray for them that “you would still grow richer.”

One other interesting aspect of Mani’s statement is the religious overtones of people’s appreciation of the Dimayugas: people would actually pray that they become even richer.

The manifestation of equality during feasts is associated with the notion of a *mabait na tao*, that is, someone who treats the poor on equal terms and can be approached for *tulong*:

No’ng mamatay ang aking anak, binigyan kami ng tigwa-1,000 eh. Tapos nagpadala pa sila dito ng mga juice, tinapay. [Sumama] pa sila do’n sa sementeryo. ‘Yong kamo sila’y mayayaman, tapos kami’y mahihirap laang na ganon, iba ang tingin nila. Hindi. Kung anong kainin nila, pag ikaw ay napunta sa kanila, ganon din ang kakainin mo. Ganon sila. Di ba, sa ibang mayaman, nakapunta ka, ano, bukod ‘yong kanilang pagkain tapos papakain sa ‘yo. Kung anong madatnan mong pagkain nila, ‘yon din ang kakainin mo rin. Ganon sila. Hindi sila katulad ng iba. (Mani 2005a)

When my child died, we were each given 1,000, eh. Then they even sent over juice, bread. They [joined] even in the cemetery. You would think because they’re the rich and we’re poor that they would look at us

differently. No. What they eat, if you go to their house, is what they will also serve you. That's how they are. Isn't it that, with other rich people, they have their exclusive food, and other food will be offered to you. What you find them eating when you get to their place is what you'll also eat. That's how they are. They're not like others.

Tulong, mabait, pag-asa, and matapobre, as indicated above, are associated with the manner by which the poor are being treated fairly or otherwise. Sharing a feast (*handa*) is one of the symbolic gestures that ordinary people use for their judgments about equality. To eat together (*sabay-sabay kakain*) with an invited guest (*kumbidado*) is a manifestation of the desire for equality, seen particularly when those who are attending the feast eat the same kinds of food (*hindi bukod 'yong kanilang pagkain tapos 'yong papakain sa 'yo*). To the poor, the mayaman are usually discriminatory in providing different kinds of foods to different guests. Furthermore, there are occasions when most of the poor would feel discriminated against when they are allocated a different seating area separate from the mayaman. To Gene (2005), the Dimayugas' attendance in her son's funeral and their gift giving is appreciated as a gesture of their humility in remembering and caring about her loss. Such gesture breaks the social gap between a mayaman and a mahirap (poor), and showcases the desire to be treated on equal terms.

From the ordinary people's religious ideas and perceptions of leadership, we can conclude that the political relationship between the voter and the politician always involves tulong. However, the tulong that is desired and appreciated cannot be subsumed under the traditional patron-client model. The religious aspect of tulong, that is, its being *matuwid*, connotes a form of political negotiation. The poor accept the tulong because it is a means for them to achieve some freedom from the hardship of life, be it in economic, political, or social terms. However, to ordinary people, a good politician is someone who has the quality of a saint, who is approachable, willing to make a sacrifice, and sincere; who treats people equally and maintains a good loob.

### ***Liwanag and Discrimination***

The life story of Alberto (2005a, b, c, d, e), who is a farmer, demonstrates a type of journey that has produced a desire for a society free of discrimination. He has also developed his views concerning development (*pag-unlad*), which can be associated with *liwanag*.

Alberto is a farmer and the third of seven children. Originally from Albay in the Bicol region, Alberto's parents left the province due to peasant unrest at that time. Back then his father worked in sugar plantations owned by wealthy landlords (*hacenderos*). The family moved to Narciso, Quezon Province, to work in the farm of a lawyer named Montana on the basis of a promise that was made to Alberto's father regarding eventual ownership of the land. While his father worked the land, Alberto worked at a car wash. After three to four years of working for Montana, the promise was revoked and the family decided to leave because they felt deceived (*niloko*) and enslaved (*inalipin*). On being informed of this decision, Montana wanted to send Alberto's father to jail for

failing to pay for the expenses Montana spent in bringing the latter's family to Quezon. Alberto was angry as he recalled how Montana told his father to kneel in front of him in order for the debt to be written off. Fortunately, Montana's wife, Rosa, brought the family to her father (Tonio) in Calamba, Laguna. When Tonio died in 1960, Alberto's family was brought to Lola Pepeng Dimayuga in Tanauan, where his father tilled the land of the Dimayugas. The Dimayugas also sent Alberto and his youngest sister, Ire, to school.

When they first moved to the barangay in Tanauan, according to Alberto, they were maltreated and considered as aliens: *Inaapi dito ang dayuhan, no'ng bago-bago pa kami dito. Pag hindi ka nila kalahi, dayo ka. 'Yong parang kuwan, alien. Walang pag-ibig sila sa kanilang kapwa* (Newcomers are maltreated here, when we were still quite new here. If you're not one of them, you're a migrant. It's like you're an alien. They don't have love for their fellow humans) (Alberto 2005b). Sometime in 1967–1968 someone in the barangay stole seven cows from Alberto's family. The suspects were jailed for six months only. This incident angered Alberto and he decided to establish a vigilante group. He went to the residence of the thief with the intent of shooting him. To Alberto, his action would have been justified in the name of reclaiming justice for his father because the legal system was clearly biased against his family. To Alberto, the legal system was contaminated with corruption. However, when he saw the thief he could not bear to shoot him because he felt pity (*awa*) toward the thief's family. He also realized that such revenge would start a never-ending cycle. After this incident, Alberto's father died, and so did his elder brother. As a result, Alberto became "ill" but was healed later after his regular visit to Mount Banahaw to cleanse his body of "evil spirits." He described this incident of being "ill" as a trial from Christ.

Alberto is currently a vice president of the farmers' association in the barangay. For one of the livelihood projects, the association requested the barangay council a budget of P200,000 to build ninety toilets for its members. He was disappointed that only P3,000 was allocated to them. Another source of disappointment was the drug livelihood program allocated to the barangay, where none of the P1 million budget actually reached the people. Alberto's disappointments with the Philippine government have made him feel cheated (*niloko-loko*).

Not surprisingly Alberto is full of complaints and disappointments about the government, society, and politicians, who are intimately related to the incidents he has undergone. His father's maltreatment, the abuses (*pang-aapi*) they suffered for being migrants (*dayuhan*) in the barangay, and the corruption issues have made him see these as sins (*sala*) that obstruct the nation from being developed. Alberto views the *mayaman* as those who always maltreat the poor.

Throughout my interviews with Alberto, I observed his constant use of religious idioms to express his views and opinions on society, the economy, politics, and morality. His concept of a developed nation (*maunlad na bansa*) is intimately related to his perception of the *liwanag* that he experienced during his "illness." The incident made him

believe that he has been reincarnated by God (*nagkaroon ako ng reincarnate sa Panginoon*) and given a new lease on life (Alberto 2005b).

Wala na ako sa bisyo. Nasilab nga ako, ito . . . Do'n nagsimula na pumasok 'yang mga talinong 'yan na napag-aralan ko.

I no longer have vices. I was burned, here . . . That's when the wise thoughts that I studied began to sink in.

The "reincarnation" illustrates the provision of new wisdom (*talinong 'yan na napag-aralan*) for him to be able to seek the truth, scrutinize the loob of a person, and have the vision of a better society. This is clearly indicated in his "experiences" with God:

Kaya nga sabi ng Diyos, ikaw ika nga apoy, 'wag kang mamalaging nakahalukipkip. Mag-asal buhay ka sa gitna ng mga patay at mag-asal patay ka sa gitna ng mga buhay. Do'n sa salitang 'yon, maraming ibig sabihin 'yon. Di ba? O, papa'no makikibuhay ka do'n? Pag ikaw ba'y nag-iisang buhay do'n sa pagliligod ng patay, matatakot ka ba? Eh wala ka ring maasahan, patay 'yon eh. Alam mo ang ibig sabihin ng Diyos? 'Wag kang makisama sa mga patay ang katuwiran. 'Yon ang ibig sabihin no'n. Sumama ka sa mga buhay ang katuwiran, 'yon ang makakakita ka ng liwanag. (Alberto 2005b)

That's why, as God says, you, you who are the fire, don't keep yourself enclosed. Act alive in the midst of the dead, and act dead in the midst of the living. Those words have many meanings, don't they? If you were the only living, surrounded by the dead, would you be afraid? Eh, you can't depend on anyone because they're dead. Do you know what God means? Don't go along with those whose reasoning is dead. That's what it means. Go with those whose reasoning is alive, then you can see the light.

The flame (*apoy*) represents the strength of his ability to scrutinize a leader to determine if he or she is discriminatory toward the poor. Death (*patay*) illustrates the negative characteristics of a person whose loob is weak (*mahina*), who cannot be relied upon (*maasahan*) to care for the poor, a person devoid of a good loob that can lead the poor to righteousness. "Buhay ang katuwiran" refers to those whose sense of righteousness remains alive, those whose loob enables them to lead the poor along the straight path to liwanag.

Liwanag in Alberto's interpretation specifically refers to the development of a nation that provides complete freedom from discrimination and offers total happiness. To attain this state, as the statement below indicates, one is required to act as humbly as Christ in order to have a society without law and police, where the justice system is not corrupt and does not discriminate against the poor, and where there are no expenses to bear.



Kaya tayo kung susunod tayo sa ginagawa ng Panginoon na pagpakumbaba, wala nang problema ating bayan. Di ba? Hindi na kailangan ng batas ang tao. Wala nang pulis. Di ba, wala nang suswelduhan? Uunlad tayo. O, kasi wala nang gagastusan eh! Marunong kang dumisiplina sa sarili mo, di ba? (ibid.)

That is why, if we follow the Lord's example of humility, our country will no longer have problems. Right? People will have no need for laws. For the police. Isn't it that no one need be paid salaries? We will progress. Hey, there's nothing we need to spend on! You know how to discipline yourself, don't you?

In short, the discourse of liwanag illustrates ordinary people's desire for a society where prevails humility (*pagpakumbaba*), which can be interpreted as displacing the selfishness and ego behind political power, which leads to injustice. With the presence of loob similar to Christ's, people would achieve self-discipline (*sariling sikap*) and obey the rules of the Lord (Panginoon), love each other without prejudice, and care for their fellow human beings (*kapwa*). When this condition is reached, in Alberto's view, the nation will be developed into one that is free from discrimination and where justice prevails.

Alberto's stories and perceptions may signal a utopianism that may be deemed "irrelevant" to "real" politics. However, it is precisely his utopianism that tells us the way in which ordinary people have the desire, similar to ours, for an equal society. What escapes our attention is the way Alberto manifests his political resistance, couched within the languages, symbols, and ideas that are manifestly religious. The "politics" of this sort is another terrain of politics that is real (as proven by our analysis of *lakaran* and *sariling sikap*), relevant, yet mundane and hidden within the taken-for-granted realities of everyday social structures of meanings, cultural systems, and religious practices.

## Conclusion

The vast majority of Philippine traditional political studies explores only the functionality of the political relationship between a "patron" and a "client." These studies often discuss the structural changes that allow the institutional control of the system by elites, and they assume that power is obtained when one occupies political office via economic means. They focus too much on the power relations between politicians and voters, or the powerful and the powerless, within ongoing structural changes in the economy and political setup. Anything beyond that is left relatively unexplored and thereby escapes attention. This is not to say that such approaches are unimportant or irrelevant, but that they are unlikely to tell the whole story about the negotiation of power and the "hidden" aspects of political relations, especially ordinary people's ways of claiming power in a seemingly mundane political milieu. Rather than dwell on clientelist ties, factional politics, and the politics of fear, this article has examined the narratives told by ordinary people about politicians and the rich and their interactions with them in Tanauan.

That lower-income Filipinos are affected by their conditions of poverty and that they ask for tulong from politicians are not being denied; neither do I reject the fact that there are “bad” political elements at work in politics. In undertaking a study with a focus on cultural politics, I have sought in this article to comprehend at the microlevel ordinary people’s social actions and life changes, such as when asking for tulong, by treating their language and emotions as part and parcel of culture.

In this regard, it is important for us to have a general idea about the way of life of ordinary people in Tanauan, their social dynamics, as well as their constructions of sociopolitical meanings, cultural norms, and the political salience embedded in religion. It is an excavation of the “indigenous languages or a truly ‘inside view’ of the culture . . . that is disguised in a purely clientelist construct” (Ileto 1982, 102). It entails going beyond the structural, institutional, political economy, and political violence perspectives. It is thus argued that the religious concepts of *lakaran/sarili*, *mabait/loob*, *matuwid*, and *liwanag* are nuances of meaning that are manifested in ordinary people’s life experiences. These religious ideas shape and are reshaped by their own locally grounded logic and worldviews, stemming from the desire for a more egalitarian society.

## NOTES

- 1 Tanauan City is located in the northeastern part of Batangas Province. It occupies 10,716 hectares or 3.38 percent of the province’s total land area of 316,581 hectares. The municipality of Talisay bounds Tanauan to the west, the municipalities of Malvar and Balete to the south, Santo Tomas to the east, and the City of Calamba, Laguna Province, to the north. Tanauan accommodates forty-eight barangays, with the poblacion (town proper) located at the southeastern border of Tanauan. The President Laurel Highway, which traverses the poblacion, links Tanauan to Metro Manila 68 kilometers to the north and to Batangas City, the capital, 45 kilometers to the south, making Tanauan one of the busy cities in the province.
- 2 On 7 May 2001 Cesar Platon, mayor of Tanauan City from 1992 to 1998, running under the Lakas Party to which he had switched allegiance from the Nacionalista Party, was shot and killed during his gubernatorial campaign. A communist gunman is believed to have shot him dead shortly after he delivered a speech at a campaign rally in the town plaza of Tuy, Batangas Province. Tirso “Ka Bart” Alcantara, a spokesperson of the New People’s Army (NPA) in southern Tagalog, said in a press statement and a radio interview that the 52-year-old Platon was punished by the NPA for his “crimes against the people” (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 8 May 2001).
- 3 See also vol. 23 of the *Philippine Political Science Journal* 2002 for the responses to Ileto 2001 by Lande 2002 and Sidel 2002b, and Ileto’s 2002 further responses.
- 4 The names of individuals and families have been altered. The transcriptions are verbatim. The author thanks Ms. Charmaine Misalucha for her assistance in the

transcriptions and translations.

- 5 The praying of the rosary is a daily practice of an individual or among family members. In the month leading to *Undas*, known as “Day of the Dead” or “All Saints Day,” people organize a prayer group that visits from one house to the next. It is voluntary and community-oriented, but not all the precincts (*sitio*) in the study barangay have the same practice. In addition to the booklet that contains the specific prayers that need to be recited, people in the barangay use *awit* for praying the rosary. The *awit* are obtained from the priest of Tanauan Church, and most of the elderly obtain a copy of the songs written in their own small notebooks.

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